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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the pedagogical strategies that can be constructed from the technique of using questions in composition writing. Questions are classified into real, pedagogical, and rhetorical; the rhetorical intentions of real questions are examined; and the "possibility of negation" and three-stage rhetorical patterns (question/commentary/answer) are described. Other issues addressed are the possible kinds of information transferred to a reader by a real question, using questions to structure information, and the possible rhetorical effect of a question. Examples of various questioning techniques used in literature are included. (AEA)

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QUESTIONS: STRATEGIES AND INTENTIONS

> By posing the unanswerable questions of meaning, men establish themselves as question-asking beings. Hannah Arendt, Thinking.

As one possible linguistic utterance (linguists generally consider stating, exclaming, and commanding as other possible utterances), questions have had a long pedagogical history. Possible answers to some wh-questions (what? who? etc.) it is now thought helped produce Aristotle's system of the categories and he was perhaps one of the first to suggest, in the Posterior Analytics, how indirect questions[1] might be used to analyze extra-linguistic entities:

> The kinds of question we ask are as many as the kinds of things which we know. They are in fact four--(1) whether the connexion of an attribute with a thing is a fact, (2) what is the reason of the connexion, (3) whether a thing exists, (4) what is the nature of the thing. (89 b, 21 ff.)

Later, Cicero and Quintilian adapted this questioning-system to the ends of their rhetoric; and, even later, it became an important part of logical invention--usually in the order given it by Cicero and Quintilian (Cicero, Orator, XIV, 45; Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria, III, vi, 79-83)

(1) Whether it is		(2) What it is		(3) What kind it is
An sit	⟶	Quid sit	⟶	Quale sit
To hoti		Ti estiv		To dioti

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Today, the systematic use of questions plays an important role in such leading rhetorics as Frank D'Angelo's Process and Thought in Composition, and Jacqueline Berke's Twenty Questions for the Writer.

The question I would like to raise here is what should a teacher of composition look for in questions? What pedagogical strategies can he/ she construct from them? The possibilities seem immense: we can, it seems, discuss with our students the type of information a question carries--as versus, say, a command or statement; or, more obviously perhaps, we can point out the structural possibilities of a question--writing the title as a question, perhaps, or raising the thesis with a series of questions. Even more basic, however, is the question of intention: why, in other words, would a writer want to use a question instead of some other available utterance? A statement or a command?

With intention as my focus, then, let me begin with a traditional classification of questions into REAL, PEDAGOGICAL, and RHETORICAL. Each of these, perhaps, share in the same linguistic process. PEDAGOGICAL, or what Searle calls "exam" questions,[2] are typically those asked by a teacher of a student; or those that appear as study questions in a text-book. They have a public appearance and function. Their basis is some known quantity of information, and often, thought not always, a procedure for answering the question. RHETORICAL questions are also public, i.e., we never seem to ask a rhetorical question of ourselves (unlike a REAL question). In Julius Caesar, e.g., Antony uses RHETORICAL questions to stir the mob to rebellion against Brutus; in An Essay on Man, Pope seems to use them primarily to establish a persona

of the stern moralist. My guess is that the essence of a RHETORICAL question is its built-in resistance to refutation by the reader or listener. It does not seem quite right (fair? honest? linguistically proper?) to refute such a question.

REAL questions, finally, seem to cast their shadow over all PEDAGOGICAL and RHETORICAL questions. They are both public and private; we ask them of ourselves as well as of others--usually in order to look for the solution to a problem, or obtain new information about a subject. But what, in general, are the rhetorical intentions of a REAL question? Why would an author choose to use a question rather than some other available utterance, a statement or a command? After a considerable amount of discussion (and experimenting with questions in different writing situations), my students and I settled on three primary rhetorical intentions. On the whole we chose these because they have proved to be the most useful in formulating writing strategies:

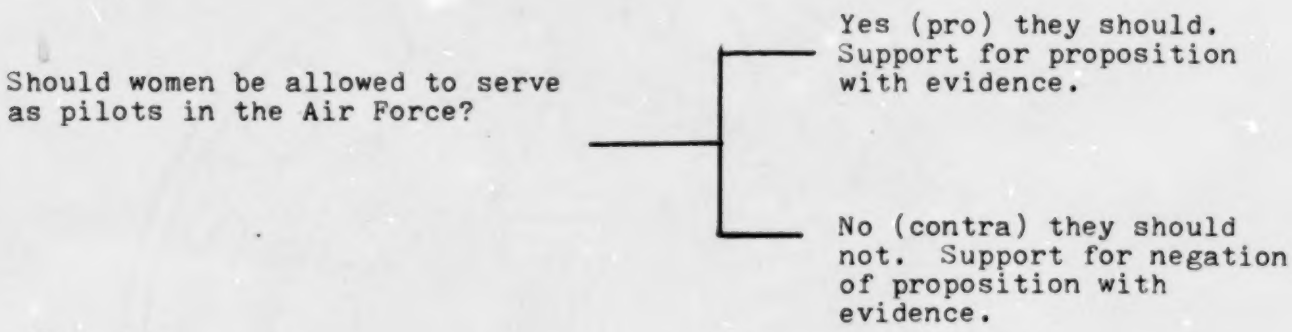
(A) A REAL question must raise a proposition for possible negation.

(B) A REAL question may express doubt, uncertainty, lack of knowledge, information; it may express awareness of contingency, of lack of order, of randomness.

(C) A REAL question may promise the reader new (and more specific) information; may request the reader to do, or think, something.

Please notice that (A) is written as a necessary intention of a REAL question; (B) and (C) are written as optional, or possible, intentions. Negating a question's proposition refers, in a logical sense, to the answer's refutation (disaffirmation) of the truth-value of the question. In terms of information such refutation would allow the answer to contain information not only opposing that in the question, but also that which

is new or radically different. But it is important, it seems, to remember that such refutation is only a possibility; a writer may also choose to affirm the proposition by supporting it with further evidence, more research, and the like, in the question's answer. The affirming/disaffirming possibilities of a REAL question give rise, it seems to me, to the following kind of binary structure:


Should women be allowed to serve as pilots in the Air Force?
Yes (pro) they should. Support for proposition with evidence.
No (contra) they should not. Support for negation of proposition with evidence.

If such a question appeared as the title then most readers, I suspect, would expect the following information (answering information) to have the general form of a debate, or dialectic. The author might first want to discuss the source of the question's proposition (who first proposed that women pilot Air Force planes? What cultural reasons, or conditions, brought such an idea into being?), and then the general nature of both pro and contra arguments. Most readers would expect the author, however, to make a stand for or against the truth of the proposition, and then to support it with his or her heaviest arguments.

Though it is perhaps more problematic, it now seems to me that the "possibility of negation" also helps writers to create a very common three-stage rhetorical pattern; namely, (i) the question, (ii) commentary on the question, or answer, (iii) the answer. (This, it

appears, is the "normal" pattern; other patterns, e.g., (i) commentary, (ii) question, and (iii) answer, also exist). An example of the "normal" pattern is this from Edward O. Wilson's Sociobiology, The New Synthesis (Cambridge: Harvard, 1975), p. 567:

QUESTION: "What can we deduce from these facts about the life of early man?"

COMMENTARY: "Before an answer is attempted, it should be noted that very little can be inferred directly from comparisons with other living primates. Geladas and baboons, the only open-country forms, are primarily vegetarian. They represent a sample of at most six species...."

ANSWER: "What we can conlude with some degree of confidence is that primitive man lived in small territorial groups, within which males were dominant over females."

The main function of the COMMENTARY, it seems, is to interpret not only the question, but also the forthcoming answer. Such interpretation, to be sure, can be very broad; it might involve the author's explaining some presupposition of the question, or why he or she asked it in the first place. Or it might simply inform the reader of facts the author deems necessary for a full understanding of the question and answer. The information in the COMMENTARY becomes, as it were, the intelligible ground of both. We may also suppose that the COMMENTARY might be framed as a warning to the reader not to expect an "ordinary" answer; or, alternatively, that the answer, when given, will be of a certain cognitive nature.

My thinking is that it is the "possibility of negation" that keeps this pattern open, moving to a probable conclusion in the answer. The reader cannot predict, at either of the first two stages, what the author's answer will be: will he or she affirm, or reject, the question's proposition? The central issue here, perhaps, is that of answerhood, ie., not only what constitutes an ~~answer~~ answer to a question (a REAL question), but what constitutes a good one, or what some logicians now call a "direct" answer.[3] Must the answer to a REAL question always be unpredictable to the reader? Is it the "possibility of negation" that gives it such unpredictability? Students, I find, are quick to learn the QUESTION/COMMENTARY/ANSWER pattern if it is presented to them in terms of possible negation of the question's proposition.

Now let me return to the other possible rhetorical intentions of a REAL question:

(B): May express doubt, uncertainty, lack of knowledge, information; may express awareness of contingency, of lack of order, of randomness.

(C) May promise the reader new (and more specific) information; may request the reader to do, or think, something.

With (B) the uncertainty intention, the writer typically would try to place him, or herself, (or perhaps some character in the narrative) in a contingent relationship with the subject, with a state of affairs, an event, an object. Such an intention might be used to express a

person's trouble with identifying another person or thing; or it might express the lack of an explanation for an event. The Correspondent's question "why?" in Crane's The Open Boat seems to fall into this latter category. As we might expect, such intention is very common in first person-narration where the reader is introduced into the mind of the narrator. But it also appears in scientific writings where the writer attempts to communicate his or her uncertainty about the subject. Every problem, presumably, involves an uncertainty, and can, consequently, be expressed with a question.

Intention (C) promises the reader new (or more specific) information, seems to me to be important for structuring, and specifying, information following the question, i.e., answering information. For example, in a question like "Where, when and how did man begin this long and fateful journey?" (Scientific American, September, 1976, p. 89), the writer seems not only to promise the reader new, and more specific, information, but also information ordered a certain way. Spatio-temporal information (where and when) would come first; then information about means, manner, or method (how). Such specifying and ordering appear to be more characteristic of a wh-question than of a yes/no, or indirect, question.[4] I advise students, accordingly, to use wh-questions whenever they have (C) intention in mind.

II

> If all things are forever in motion, every answer to any question whatsoever is equally correct. Plato, Theaetetus, 183a.

Now let me turn to the issue of possible kinds of information transferred to a reader by a REAL question. Our "purest" intention with a wh-question, it seems, is to elicit new information about an entity, an event, process and the like. The question first identifies the kind of information we want, and the answer then specifies it. "Where?" for example, communicates, generally, our need for spatial information, "when?" for temporal, and so on. In all, there are approximately seven different kinds of wh-questions, a number fairly constant in most languages. Unlike other recognized types of questions, yes/no, and indirect, wh-questions form a paradigm. With one or two exceptions, wh-questions in ancient Greek are marked with the letter π ("pi"), in Latin with "q' and in the Germanic languages, including English, with "w."

Recognition of such a paradigm may lie behind the use of wh-questions by such writers as Homer and Shakespeare. In the Odyssey (XIV, 187), for example, when two strangers meet it is usual for one to ask the other three wh-questions. They are always the same three and they always occur in the same sequence:

(i)	(ii)	(iii)
"Who, from whence, are you?"	"What city?"	"What parents?"

In Othello, you may remember, Emilia remarks that had Othello forced

Iago to answer certain wh-questions about Desdemona's alledged meetings with Cassio, then the truth might have been forced into the open; or at least Iago's lies detected:

> ~~What~~ Why should he call her whore? Who keeps her company?
> What place? What time? What form? What likelihood?
> (IV, ii, 137-140)

Another remarkable feature of wh-questions, apparently first noticed by Aristotle, is the ease by which we can paraphrase them into "categories" of possible information about any entity, event, process, etc:

(A) WHAT? ⟶ Substance, stuff, material, etc., of entity.

WHO? ⟶ Identifies entity as person.

(B) WHERE? ⟶ Place, Space, Context, location, of entity.

WHEN? ⟶ Time, period, duration, etc., of entity.

HOW MUCH/MANY ⟶ Quantity, measurement, number, etc., of entity.

(C) HOW? ⟶ Mode, means, manner, method, etc., of entity.

WHY? ⟶ Cause, reason, motive, function, etc., of entity.

Please notice the sequence of (A), (B), and (C). With (A) the writer might tentatively choose an entity as subject; it might either be an inanimate object, a mountain, an artifact, etc., an animate object not a person, a deer, a tree, etc., or, of course, a person (WHO?). With (B) the writer might then try to elicit as much factual information about the entity as possible. The intention of such information, roughly, would be to convince the reader that the entity is "real," that the writer has experienced it in a certain way, and that the reader might also experience it. With (C) the writer would reach the level of interpretation; of the classification of such information, or merely of a cognitive interest in it. Asking and answering HOW?, for example, a technical writer might supply the reader with information about the methodology of some experiment, the means of establishing an operation, or the manner in which a process produces some desired entity. My experience has been that WHY? is the question leading to what might be called "informational closure," as long as the writer does not ask it, the process of gathering information will continue. A writer will, of course, eventually have to stop seeking information. But, to the extent that he or she still wants the questions to elicit more specific information, then she will suppress asking WHY?.

The paradigmatic use of wh-questions, motivated by the need to elicit complete (and factual) information about any subject, is perhaps most familiar to us in the practice of journalists--one, as a cartoon from The New Yorker shows, easily misapplied.

"Who? What? Where? Why? And when?"

(1 January 1979)

III

> Questions are the engines of the intellect, the cerebral machines which convert energy to motion, and curiosity to controlled inquiry. There can be no thinking without questioning--no purposeful study of the past, nor any serious planning for the future. 5

Now let me briefly consider the issue of using question to structure information and the possible rhetorical effect of a question. Under using questions to structure information, we may ask, Where should a writer put a question in the text? In the title, beginning, middle, or end of a paragraph? In parentheses within a statement? At the beginning of a new section? What, in general, seems to determine such placement? One major effect of a question seems to be the suspension of some established rhetorical pattern. If a writer is narrating an event, then a question will usually suspend the forward motion of the narration; or, if he or she is, as so often in technical writing, comparing one entity with another, then a question will usually suspend the comparison. Suspending forward motion may be one reason most text questions occur at transitional points in a composition. It might also partially explain why the tag element, of a tag-question, comes at the end of the utterance. By suspending the linear movement of the stating element, the question usually forces the reader to stop and think about the proposition of the whole utterance.[6]

If suspension is indeed the usual effect of asking a text-question, then this would allow the writer several additional strategies. For example, it would allow him or her to swtich from one rhetorical

pattern to another; from, say, a narration to a definition or from a comparison/contrast to a description. Or it might allow her to digress, even switch topics. In Conrad's Heart of Darkness, you may recall, one such use of questions, it seems, is to signal the reader that the author is switching from straight narration, what Marlowe has done, or is now doing, to a commentary on such doings. Since Marlowe is not only the agent, but also the narrator, such questions are put to himself.

Finally, I would like to close with a remark or two on the possible rhetorical failure (or fatique?) of a question. A question does not necessarily fail because it goes un-answered in the text; indeed, not answering a text-question may be a skillful way of posing problems not dealt with in the composition, or of criticizing the opinions and ideas of other writers. Raising text-questions, usually in the opening lines, and then stating that they will go un-answered seems to be a fairly common strategy of writers wanting to clarify their rhetorical intention. For example, Charles Sanders Pierce:

> Phaneroscopy [or Phenomenology] is the description of the phaneron; and by the phaneron I mean the collective total of all that is in any way or in any sense present to the mind, quite regardless of whether it corresponds to any real thing or not. If you ask present when, and to whose mind, I reply that I leave those questions unanswered, never having entertained a doubt that those features of the phaneron that I have found in my mind are present at all times and to all minds. 7

The failure of a question, like any other linguistic utterance, is perhaps one part of the probable (and frequent) failure of human

intentions generally. And, as such shares in the same rule of experience. If some experiences are intentional (not all are unintentional, or occur solely by chance), then all intentions must succeed or fail through experience. Yet no such experience is possible without a prior intention. For a question to fail, then, it must be put to the test of experience, i.e., someone must be asked to experience it as a question, and not as any chance utterance. One way of acquainting students with this is to ask them to form small groups in which written questions are formulated and answered. The student who formulates the question must also announce his or her intention with it. If the other members of the group decide that the question fails its intention, then the group as a whole re-formulates the question; or, alternatively, decides that the intention can never succeed with a question. Such group action only occurs after students have discussed the general rhetorical intention of a question (as described above in this paper), plus the sorts of information each type of question may convey to a reader.

NOTES

[1] "Indirect" is a modern definition of a type of utterance which lacks the structural markers, inverted word-order, and ?, of the "direct" question. Examples of indirect questions would be: President Carter wonders what brother Billy is doing tonight; I would like to ask you if you would like to attend our party tonight. Such utterances have the "force" of a question, but not the ordinary structure of one.

[2] Speech Acts: An Essay in The Philosophy of Language (Cambridge, 1970), p. 66.

[3] See Nuel D. Belnap, Jr., & Thomas B. Steel, Jr., The Logic of Questions and Answers (Yale, 1976), pp. 3-5.

[4] A yes/no question, as the name suggests, is any question to which an affirmative, or negative, answer is applicable. Unlike the answer to a wh-question, the answer to a yes/no question does not necessary have to supply the speaker with new information about the subject of the question.

[5] Stephen Gale, "A Prolegomenon to an Interrogative Theory of Scientific Inquiry," in Questions, ed., Henry Hiz (D. Reidel, 1978), p. 320.

NOTES (2)

[6] Textbook authors typically warn their readers not to use too many questions in their text: "...in writing, questions should be used sparingly. Like expensive perfume or after-shave lotion, they are most effective when saved for special occasions." Adelstein & Pival, The Writing Commitment (Harcourt, Brace, 1976), pp. 85-86.

[7] "The Principles of Phenomenology," in Philosophical Writings of Pierce, ed., Justus Buchler (Dover, 1955), p. 75.